Phrase Painting and Goal Orientation in Two Late Gesualdo Madrigals

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I

The late madrigals of Carlo Gesualdo have challenged the minds and ears of theorists for over three centuries. This challenge comes largely from the unorthodox type of chromatic harmony that we find in certain passages—a chromaticism that seems to belie its own place in the history of Western music. Of the late madrigals of Gesualdo, two of the most frequently quoted and analyzed are "Io pur respiro" and "Moro lasso" from his sixth book of madrigals. These two works, likewise, are the focus of attention in this article.

It is not the intent of this paper to attempt an explanation of Gesualdo's unique chromaticism in terms of the harmonic practices of the Renaissance or Baroque periods. This has already been attempted by numerous authors over the years, with highly diversified and controversial results. However, some of these results will be presented here as a preliminary setting to the principal goal of this paper, which is to examine two structural principles in operation in these madrigals that offer to give greater understanding and meaning to the chord progressions themselves.

Perhaps the most objective attempt to catalogue Gesualdo's chromaticism in a stylistic approach can be found in John Clough's article "The Leading Tone in Direct

Chromaticism: From Renaissance to Baroque."[1] The article gives a summary of different types of chromatic progressions, with the emphasis on chromatic-third relationships (the chromatic-third progression being the salient feature of Gesualdo's more unconventional chromatic progressions). Subsequently, it shows which of these are either compatible with or foreign to typical Baroque chromaticism. Most of the progressions that are regarded as compatible with Baroque harmonic practice involve the presence of secondary dominants or the Neapolitan triad. An example of the former is I-V/ii-ii, in which the progression from I to V/ii is a chromatic-third relationship. The only other types of chromatic progressions that were observed by John Clogh to exemplify Baroque harmonic practice involved the resolution of the "Lower-Leading Tone"—the third of a major triad—upward by half-step to any tone of the following chord."[2] This latter type of progression does not usually result in chromatic-third movement, so that it bears less significance to the study of Gesualdo's chromaticism.

The importance of Clough's article for the appreciation of Gesualdo's handling of chromatic harmony is that it clearly defines which of Gesualdo's chromatic-third progressions are foreign to Baroque functional harmony, and therefore, which are the most representative of the late Renaissance period to which Gesualdo belonged. An excellent example of such a progression of chromatic thirds foreign to the Baroque style is the opening of "Moro lasso," one of the madrigals under consideration here. (See Example 1.)

On the other hand, certain theorists and authors have valiantly struggled to find functional explanations for progressions such as that presented in Example 1. Glenn Watkins, for example, believed that a great percentage of Gesualdo's chromatic progressions derive from the use of secondary dominants (cf. Clough, above). However, for the opening of "Moro lasso," Mr. Watkins turned to a theory presented by another author, Carl Dahlhaus, for assistance. Dahlhaus proposed that certain of Gesualdo's chromatic-third progressions derive from the juxtaposition of two Phrygian cadences—i.e., d_6-E:c_6-D.[3] At the point of conjunction between these two cadences—namely, E to c_6—we find a chromatic-third relationship that sometimes occurs in

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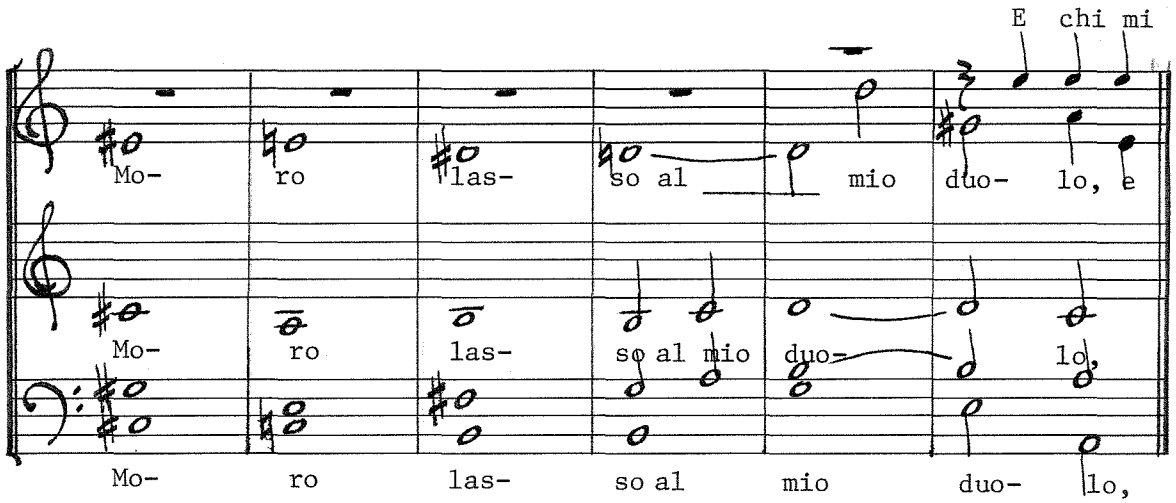
[1]John Clough, "The Leading Tone in Direct Chromaticism: From Renaissance to Baroque," Journal oF Music Theory 1/1 (March, 1957):2-21.

[2]Ibid., p. 7.

[3]Glenn Watkins, Gesualdo—The Man and His Music (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), p. 204.

Example 1. "Moro lasso," mm. 1-6.



Gesualdo's music. Applying this reasoning, Watkins observed that the opening of "Moro lasso" can, indeed, be interpreted along these lines, provided that we assume that the first chord of the progression is actually a "suppressed" b_6 chord.[4] The resulting progression would then be b_6-$C^{\#}$|a_6-B for the first four chords (the first being suppressed).

Such attempts as these by Watkins and Dahlaus to find Baroque period explanations for Gesualdo's chromaticism fall short of explaining all of the progressions that Gesualdo wrote using the chromatic-third relationship. Furthermore, it is those progressions that John Clough termed "foreign" to the Baroque style that do, in fact, defy explanation in functional harmonic terms. It is best, therefore, to simply accept Gesualdo's chromaticism as a product of the late Renaissance—the period of di Lasso, Vicentino, and de Rore—rather than to superimpose the thinking of later generations. In this article, the relationship of the chromatic third is simply accepted as an important feature of Gesualdo's style, both on the level of the chord progression and on a larger structural level that derives from a partition of the poetry that Gesualdo set to music.

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[4] Ibid., p. 205.

II

There are two types of goal orientation exhibited by the madrigals "Io pur respiro" and "Moro lasso" that appear to override the importance of the simple chord progression itself:

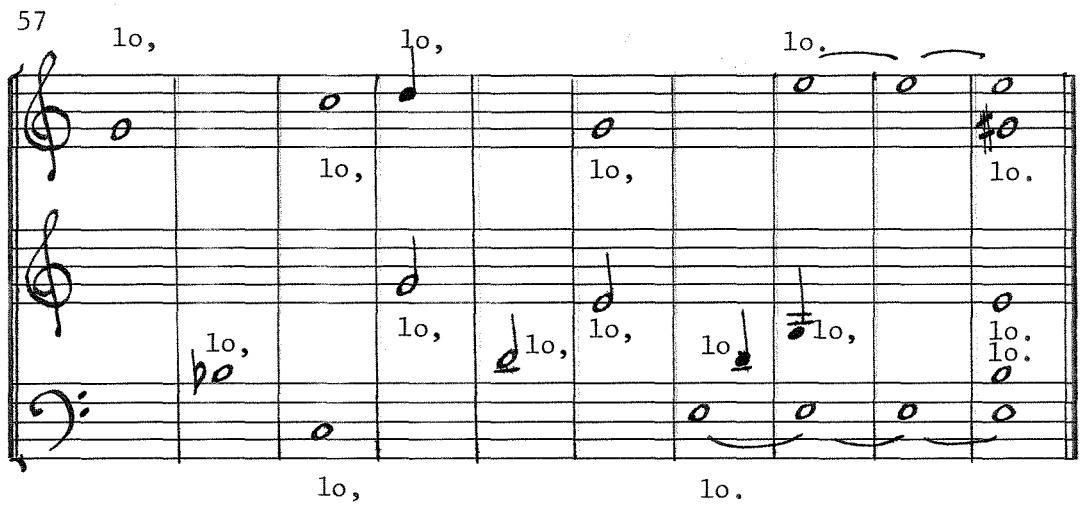
1. Phrase painting of individual phrases of text and
2. the harmonic beginning and ending points of each verse (line) of poetry.

Both of these types of goal orientation have their basis in the texts of the madrigals—making the poetry that Gesualdo set of supreme importance. This importance is certainly compatable with the Renaissance practice of word painting, as many harmonic and melodic choices in the late Renaissance seem to have been made in order to reflect the mood or meaning of individual words of text. In the two Gesualdo madrigals under consideration here, occasional instances of word painting exist, such as the rest that occurs between "re" and "spiro" (respiro=to breathe), at the beginning of "Io pur respiro," or the lively melisma that generally occurs with the word vita (life) throughout both madrigals. However, what appears to have more importance than these isolated instances of word painting is the general level of chromaticism that reflects the morbid natures of both texts. This chromaticism occurs in both the homophonic and polyphonic sections, so that distinctions cannot be made on the basis of texture. However, the polyphonic sections often contain the most unconventional chord formations; and it is in these sections that the practice dubbed by myself as phrase painting is most observable.

I shall define phrase painting as directed melodic movement, often involving chromaticism, toward the final goal note of a phrase of text (a phrase being a group of words enclosed by punctuation). The goal note is almost always a note of relative repose, and is usually diatonic, regardless of the amount of chromaticism found within the phrase as a whole. Thus the term phrase painting is meant to reflect the acutal manner of speaking a phrase, with a gradual falling off (cadence) as the end of a phrase approaches. This concept came to mind when it was observed that the final note of nearly every phrase of text was a pitch that was diatonic to the tonality of the entire madrigal. This was a rather startling observation when one looks, in particular, at the most highly chromatic polyphonic sections of these two madrigals—namely, the closing sections. A reduction showing only the final pitches of the phrase in these two final sections reveals that the only pitches which are not diatonic are single instances of $B^{\flat}$ and the raised thirds of the last chords in each ($G^{\#}$ and $C^{\#}$). (See Example 2 and Ex-

ample 3.) Reductions showing the goal notes of the complete madrigals are presented in Example 4 and Example 5, revealing a very diatonic substructure for each madrigal—largely the result of the concept referred to here as phrase painting.

Example 2. "Io pur respiro," Final Pitches of Phrases, mm. 57-end.

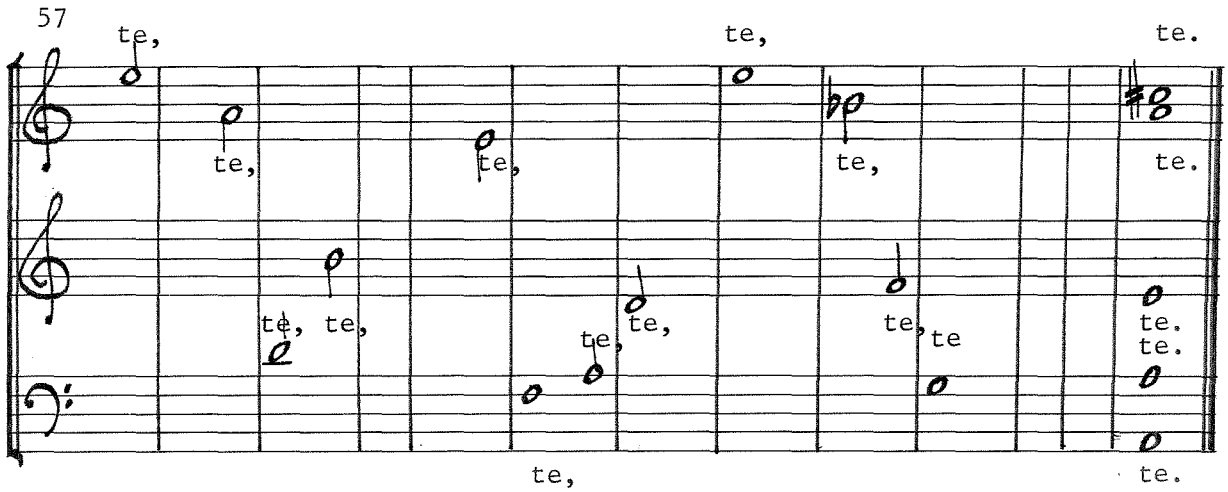


However, one can observe a small number of goal notes in Example 4 and Example 5 that do not fit the tonalities of the madrigals in question. (It is assumed that the tonality of "Io pur respiro" is E and that of "Moro lasso" is A.) These instances do not refute the notion of phrase painting. Rather, these goal notes form the end points of structural units larger than the phrase of text—namely, the verse (line of text in the poem). These larger structural goals override the importance of the phrases in the same way that phrase painting overrode the importance of individual chord progressions. Thus, we are carried to yet a deeper level (again, based on the text) of these madrigals.

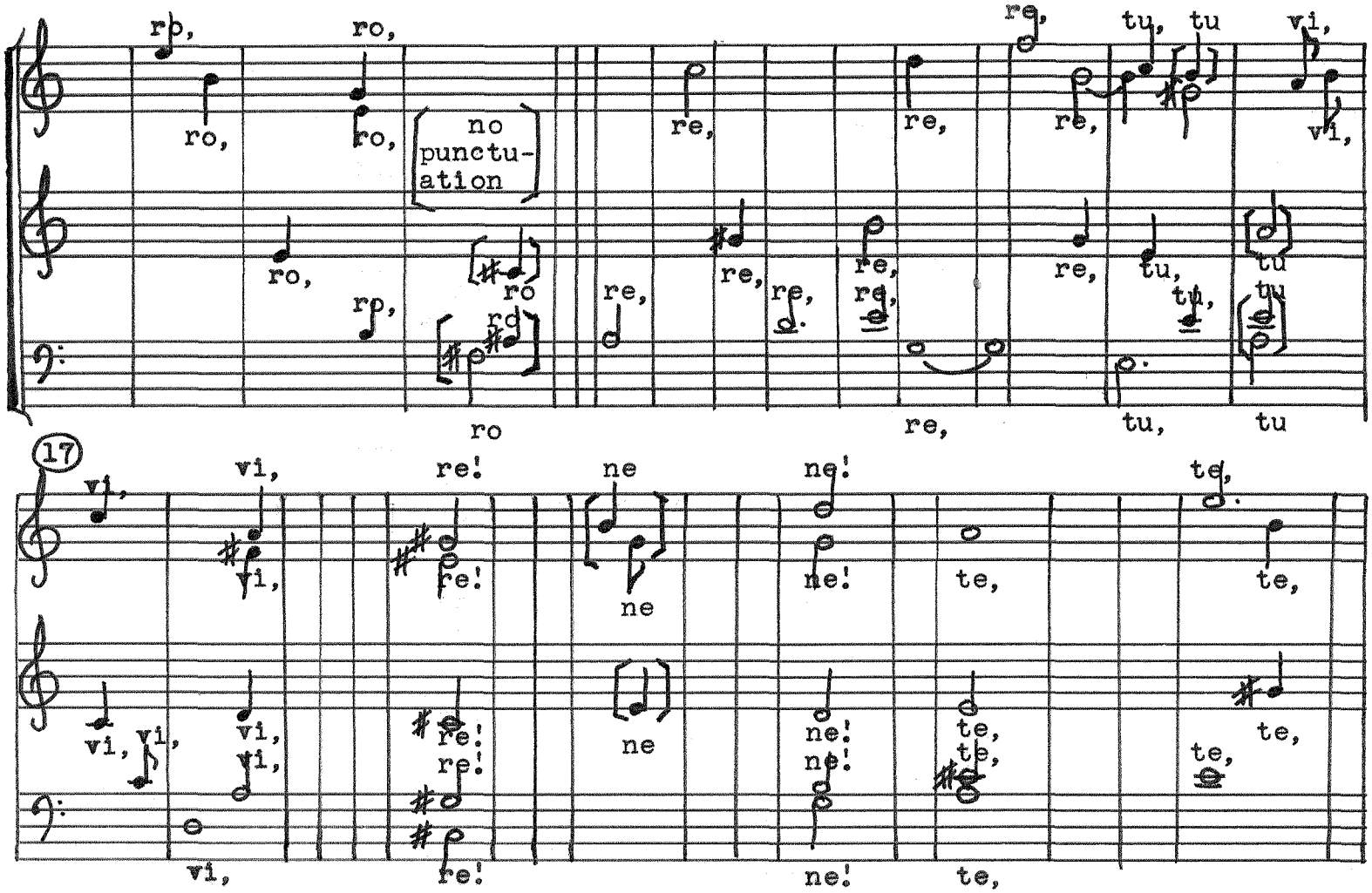
The poems that Gesualdo set are somewhat irregular in regard to their verse structure. For example, "Io pur respiro" has two stanzas, with four verses in each stanza, but the number of syllables in each verse varies considerably:

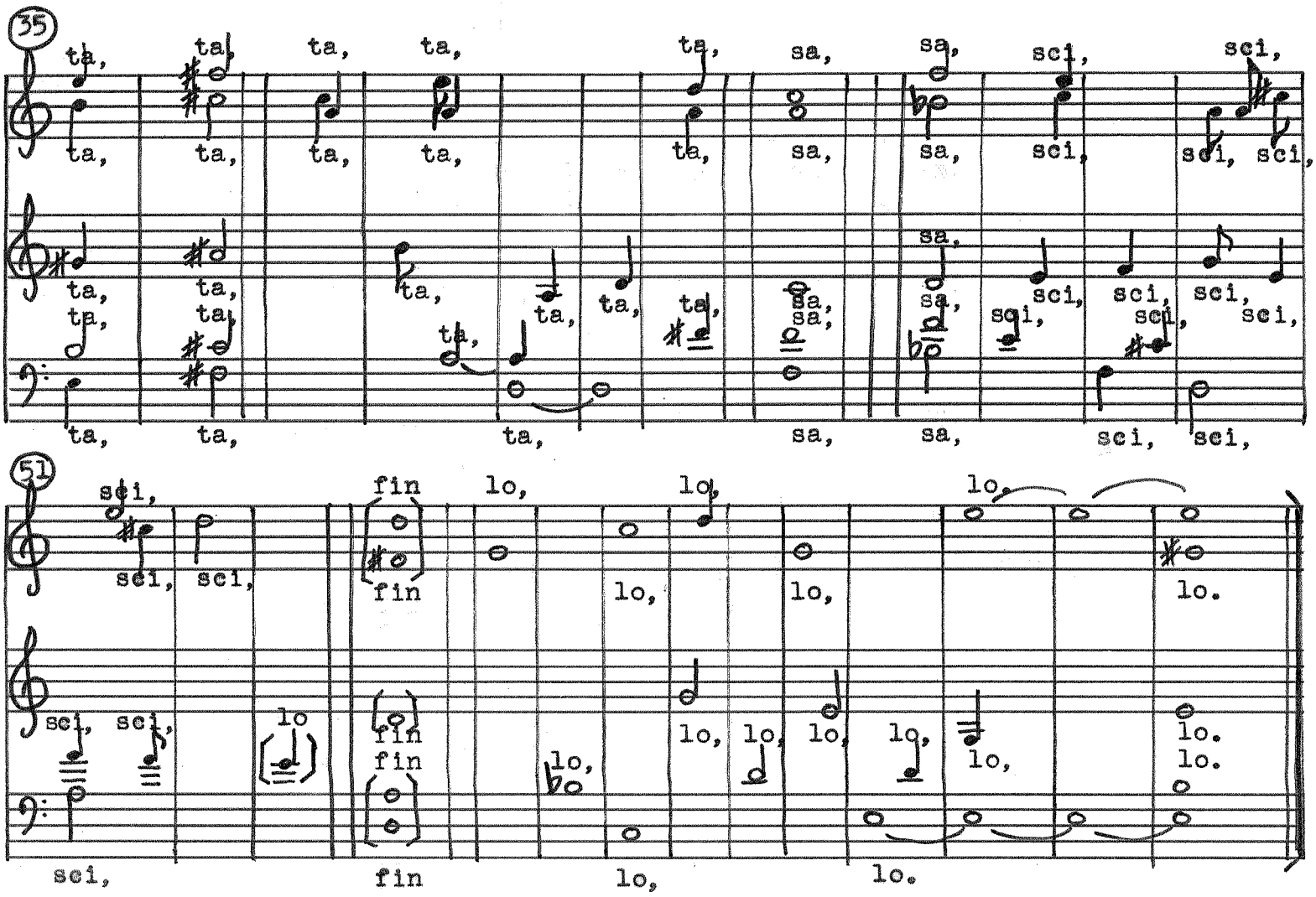
Io pur respiro in cosi gran dolore,
E tu pur vivi, ò dispietato core!
Ahi che non viè più spene
Di riveder il nostro amato bene!

Example 3. "Moro lasso," Final Pitches of Phrases, mm. 57-end.



Example 4. Goal Notes of "Moro lasso."

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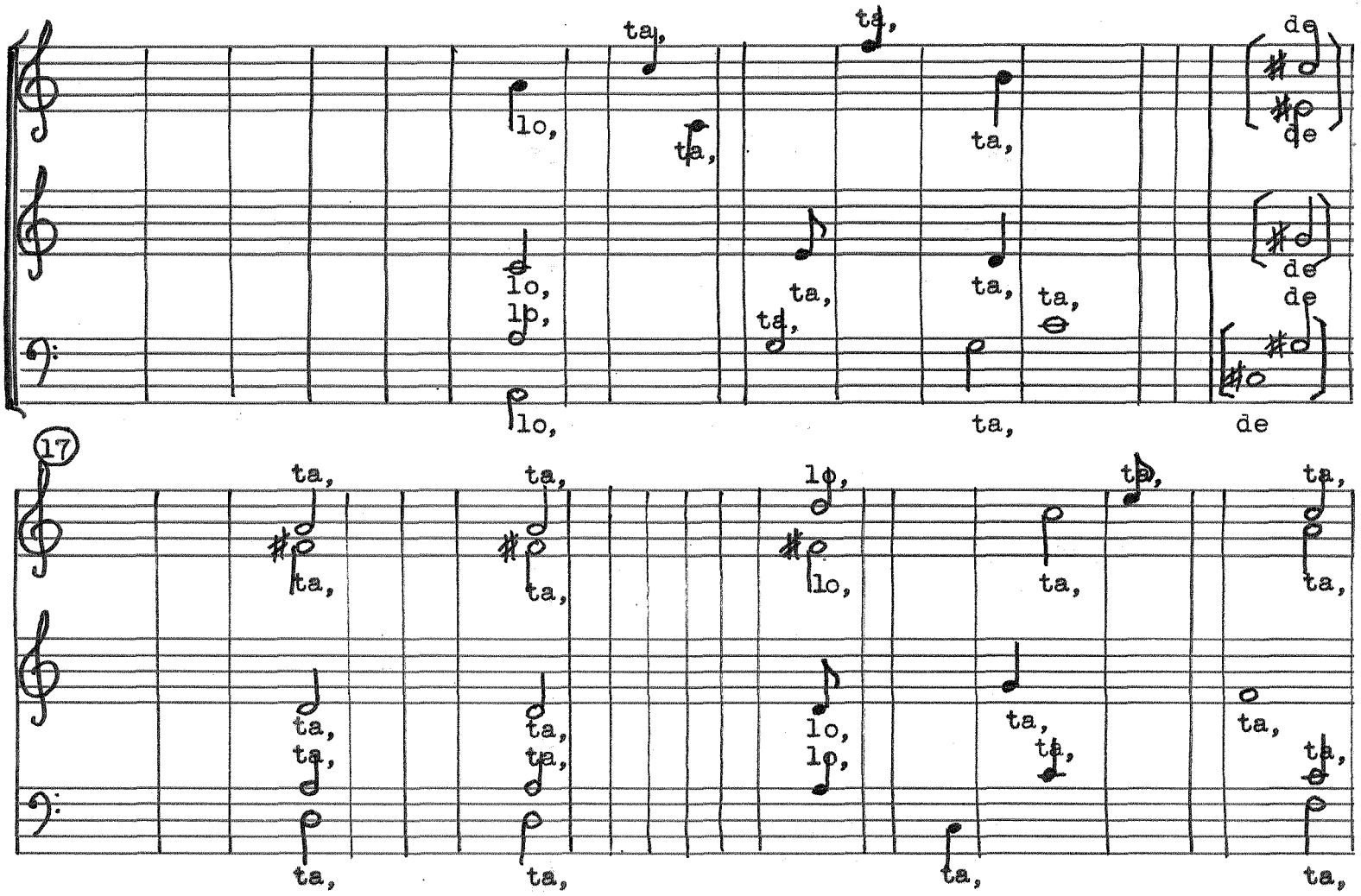
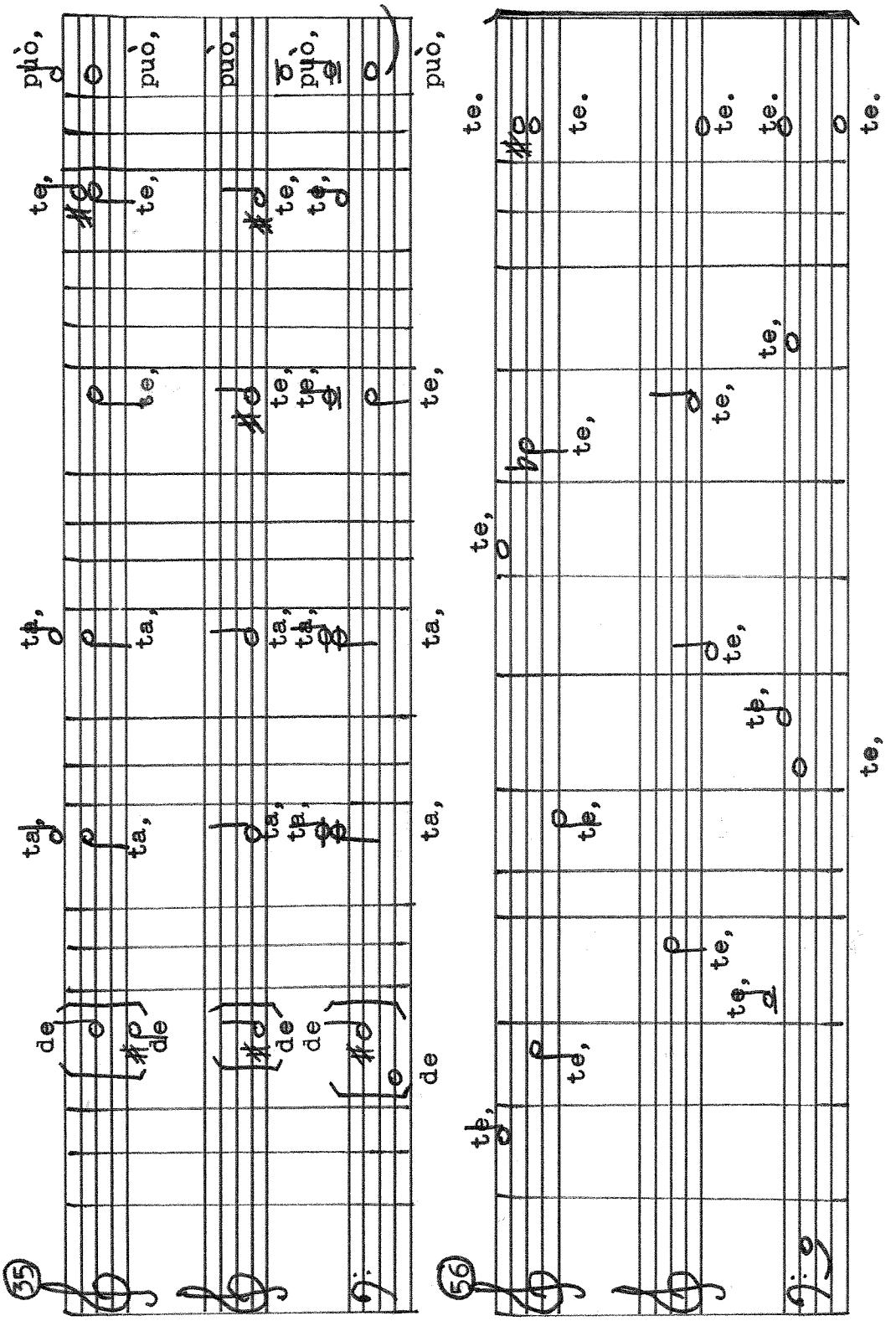
ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, sa, sa, sci, sci,
ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, sa, sa, sci, sci, sci,
ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, sa, sa, sci, sci, sci, sci,
ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, sa, sa, sci, sci,
51
sci, fin lo, lo, lo,
sci, sci, fin lo, lo, lo.
sci, sci, lo fin lo, lo, lo, lo, lo, lo.
fin fin lo, lo, lo.
sci, fin lo, lo.

Example 5. Goal Notes of "Io pur respiro."

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56

Deh morte, danne aita!
Uccidi questa vita,
Pietosa ne ferisci, e un colpo solo
A la vita dia fin et al gran duolo.

Translation[5]

In such anguish I still breathe,
And you still live, oh pitiless heart!
Ah, that there is no longer hope
Of seeing once again our well-beloved!

On death, give us help:
Kill this life;
Merciful, wound us, and let a single blow
To life give an end and a great woe.

"Moro lasso" has even more irregularity in the number of syllables per verse. In addition, it has only three verses in the second stanza:[6]

Moro lasso al mio duolo,
E chi mi può dar vita,
Ahi, che m'ancide
e non vuol dar mi aita.

O dolorosa sorte,
Chi dar vita mi può
Ahi, mi da morte.

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[5]Archibald T. Davison and Willi Apel, Historical Anthology of Music, revised ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 253.

[6]In Carl Parrish, A Treasury of Early Music (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958), pp. 181-188, the text of "Moro lasso" is regarded as having three stanzas, instead of the two mentioned here. The only difference between the first and second stanzas, according to Parrish, is that the first stanza ends with the word vita and the second with the word aita. In Howard M. Brown, Music in the Renaissance (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976) pp. 361-362, the author presents the same madrigal with only two stanzas, the first being the same as Parrish's second. As Brown drew upon a more recent edition of the Gesualdo madrigals I have chosen his poetic structure as the basis for my discussion.

Translation[7]

I die, weary, from my pain,
And the one who can give me life,
Alas, kills me
And will not give me aid.

O grievous fate,
The one who can give me life,
Alas, gives me death.

The above irregularities are not easily detected in the music itself, as Gesualdo freely repeated verses, phrases, and (in the case of "Moro lasso") stanzas, thereby obscuring the original poetic structure. What does appear to have musical significance, on the other hand, is the relationship that exists between the beginning and ending keys (or chords, if there is no clear tonality) of each verse. These relationships exhibit a degree of consistency and symmetry that may cause one to believe that the composer deliberately planned them. Example 6 illustrates this first, by presenting the initial and final tonalities of each verse of "Io pur respiro," as well as the intervallic relationship between the two tonalities. It must be admitted that it was sometimes difficult to determine the intial and final tonalities—the outer structural goals—of a verse. At times, overlapping verses cause the tonalities to blend together (as between the end of the first verse and the beginning of the second), in which case it is necessary to disentangle the verses by actually ignoring those pitches that belong texturally to the adjacent verse. On another occasion, the second inversion of a triad on a strong beat was employed to define the tonality, as one generally finds only the tonic six-four chord used in this fashion in the late Renaissance period. The second and fifth verses incorporate this chord structure near their beginnings, whereas the second verse also employs it near the end. A most difficult verse to analyze from the point of view of a beginning tonality is the sixth verse, as it starts with a very rapid harmonic rhythm that moves primarily through the circle of fifths. I chose b as the initial tonality because the perfect fifth

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[7]In Charles Burkhart, Anthology for Musical Analysis 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972), p. 45, the author presents his own translation, used here, in which the two-stanza arrangement of Howard Brown (Ibid.) is followed. However, I have arranged the first stanza into four verses, instead of three, as the rhyme scheme suggests four verses of almost equal length.

Example 6. "Io pur respiro," Key Structure Diagram.

initial		*final*	*intervallic relationship*
e	Io . . . dolore,	G	↑3rd
a	E tu . . . core!	$f^{\#}$	↓3rd
a	Ahi . . . spene	e	↑5th
e	Di . . . bene!	G	↑3rd
d	Deh . . . aita!	$f^{\#}$	↑3rd
(?)b	Uccidi . . . vita,	D	↑3rd
C	Pietosa . . . solo	G	↑5th
C	A la . . . duolo.	E	↑3rd

B-$F^{\#}$ is the first strong interval that we hear in this verse. However, in the key diagram for "Io pur respiro" in Example 6, a perfect symmetry of interval relationships would emerge if the initial tonality of verse six were actually $F^{\#}$, and not B, for in that case the interval relationship would be down a third, as in the second verse of the first stanza. One would then see an overall interval relationship of third, third, fifth, third for both stanzas. Considering the rapidity of the harmonic rhythm at the beginning of the sixth verse, as well as the fact that the preceding measure (and verse) ended on a strong $F^{\#}$ Major triad, it is possible to view the sixth verse as beginning with an $F^{\#}$ tonality.

The beginning and ending tonalities of verses in "Moro lasso" are somewhat easier to determine than in "Io pur respiro." Example 7 shows that the first two stanzas of "Moro lasso" have the same intervallic relationships, the result of their having the same text and music (transposed). The third stanza, on the other hand, is unique with its odd number of verses. In a sense, the middle verse of this stanza functions as a neutral verse from the point of view of interval relationships, as it begins and ends in the same tonality—the only verse in both madrigals to do so. This creates an effective overall balance for the third stanza, as the two outer verses contain the same intervallic relationships.

In "Moro lasso" a special problem arose whenever a verse began with a series of chromatic-third progressions, as in the opening verse, for the feeling of tonality is very unclear. In such cases, I simply chose the initial chord as the initial tonality for the chart in Example 7. Similar situations occured at the ends of verses three and seven.

Example 7. "Moro lasso," Key Structure Diagram.

initial		*final*	*intervallic relationship*
C#	Moro . . . duolo	a	↓3rd
a	E chi . . . vita	C	↑3rd
e	Ahi . . . m'ancide	C#	↓3rd
B	e . . . aita	D	↑3rd
F#	Moro . . . duolo	D	↓3rd
d	E chi . . . vita	F	↑3rd
d	Ahi . . . m'ancide	B	↓3rd
A	e . . . aita	C	↑3rd
F	O . . . sorte	B	↑4th
e	Chi . . . può	e	---
e	Ahi . . . morte	A	↑4th

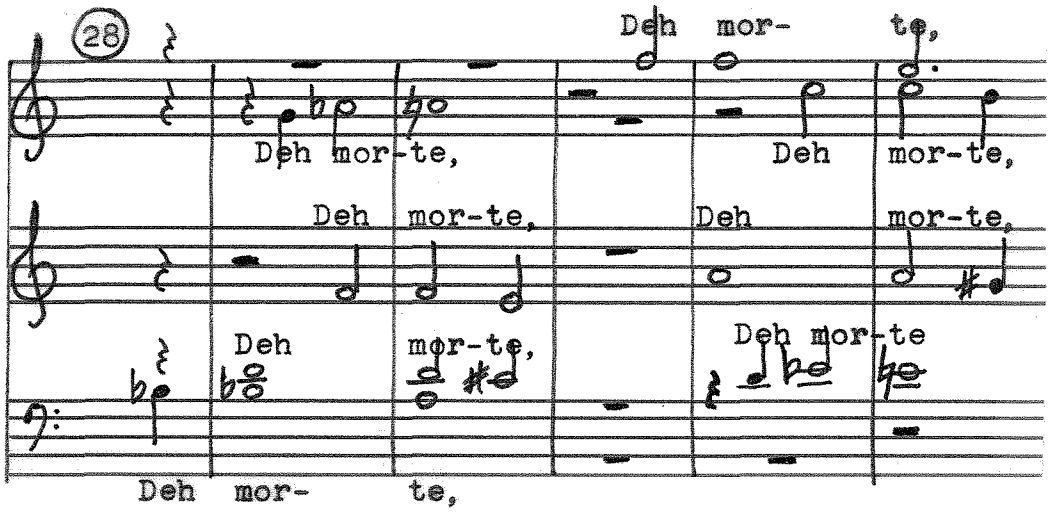
Verse nine, on the other hand, is unique in that its two cadences employ untraditional tritone relatonships (see mm. 48 and 52). In this instance, I similarly chose the final chord (B) as the final tonality of the verse.

III

The two principles of goal orientation that have been presented above—(1)the concept of phrase painting, and (2)the beginning and ending tonalities of each verse—help to shed some light on a number of the more unusual sonorities and chord progressions found within these madrigals by providing a new framework from which to begin analysis. For example, the idea of phrase painting can be applied in many instances to show the origin of certain non-Renaissance sonorities. Example 8 presents two early instances of the augmented-sixth chord (the second being in actuality a diminished-third chord) in "Io pur respiro" (mm. 29, 32). By applying the notion of phrase painting, these augmented-sixth chords are seen as linear formations resulting from all four voices approaching their respective goal notes at the end of the phrase Deh morte. Each voice progresses by half steps in its brief point of imitation (although the imitation is not exact), and the augmented-sixth chords arise from these points of imitation coming together at different positions within the phrases.

Example 9 shows an interesting situation in which a

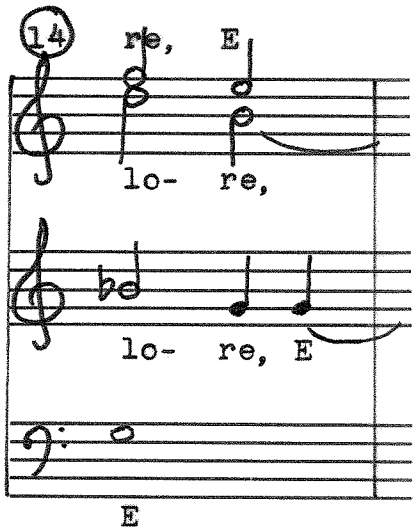
Example 8. "Io pur respiro," Occurrences of Augmented-Sixth Chords, mm. 28-33.



minor-seventh chord emerges as the result of two different phrases of text overlapping (m. 14 of "Io pur respiro"). If we ignore the G in the lowest voice here, for it actually belongs to the next phrase of text, the remaining voices form a B^{b} Major triad. Whether or not Gesualdo thought in this manner when he was composing the madrigal is, of course, impossible to know. However, it does appear that Gesualdo was very conscious of the text, as this article hopes to demonstrate, so that we might realistically attach some significance to the question of whether or not a pitch is related by text to other pitches in the same sonority.

The final sections of both madrigals are also very good illustrations of phrase painting creating unusual sonorites. Example 10, which presents the last seven measures of "Io pur respiro," reveals an unusual collection of triads and seventh chords that, taken by themselves, do not fit the standard Renaissance harmonic vocabulary. However, when one focuses upon the goal notes of the phrases (circled in Example 10), it is easy to see that all of the non-traditional sonorities are nothing more than linear chords arising from the movement of the individual lines toward these phrase goals. It is because of the constant overlapping of the points of imitation in this final section that so many unusual sonorites result. Similarly, the last nine measures of "Moro lasso" contain numerous linear chords uncommon to the Renaissance, as seen in Example 11.

Example 9. "Io pur respiro," Occurence of Minor-Seventh Chord, m. 14.

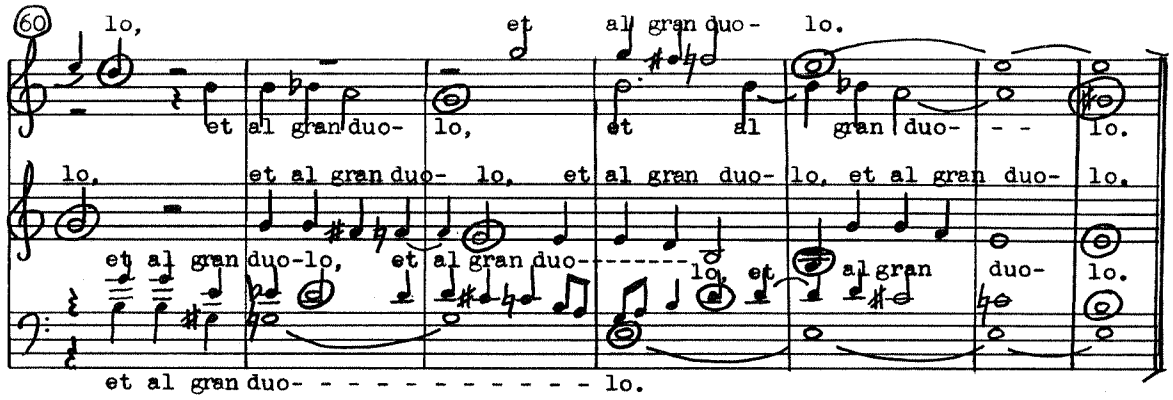


As a final application of the concepts presented in this article, it is important to note that some of the unusual root progressions seen in these madrigals can be understood as occurring at the juncture of two verses of text. For instance, in "Io pur respiro" the second verse ends on a C♯ Major triad, and the third verse begins on an A Minor chord (mm. 22-23). This is one of the types of chromatic-third progressions that John Clough regarded as foreign to the later Baroque style. Rather than to attempt to justify this progression in the various ways in which other theorists have tried, it is adequate, in the context of this paper, to view the C♯ Major triad as the final chord of one verse and A Minor triad as the initial chord (and tonality) of the succeeding verse.

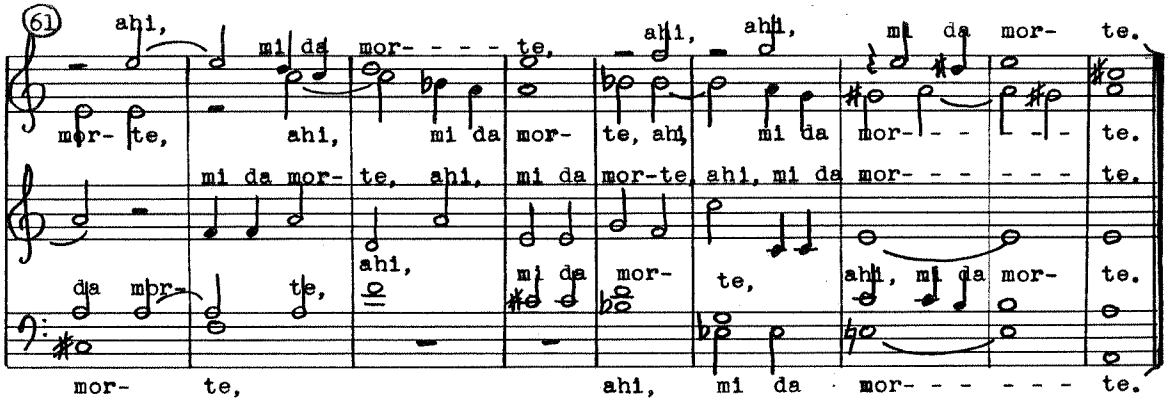
A number of root progressions by step, involving two major triads, also can be noted at the juncture of verses. For example, verse six of "Io pur respiro" ends with a D Major triad, whereas verse even begins with a C Major triad (m. 42). Similarly, in "Moro lasso" the third verse ends with a C♯ Major chord and the fourth verse begins with B Major (mm. 16-17). The corresponding (parallel) juncture in the second stanza (mm. 38-39) has a step progression from B Major to A Major.

As a closing thought concerning this discussion of phrase painting and verse goal-orientation in "Io pur respiro" and

Example 10. "Io pur respiro," mm. 60-66.



Example 11. "Moro lasso," mm. 61-69.



"Moro lasso," it is necessary to return to the spirit of controversy and debate in which theorists were known to find themselves when discussing the harmonic language of the late Gesualdo madrigals. As no theorist can hope to recapture the exact thinking of a composer centuries after the composer's death, one can only add the ideas presented within this paper to the already existing body of theoretical speculation on Gesualdo's compositional techniques. However, it is hoped that the consistent and interesting results obtained by the application of the concepts presented here indicate that some new insight has been gained. At the least, the results might induce theorists to take a more careful look at how the text of a composition might have influenced a composer's overall plan for his musical ideas.